"But I jest made the boys hold their horses till I got that there road-tax outen him first."

"Can't you git it?"

"Naw," drawled Byram. "I sent Billy Delany to McCould's shanty to collect it, but McCloud near killed Bill with a axe. That was Tuesday. Some o' the boys was fixin' to run McCloud outer town, but I guess most of us ain't hankerin' to lead the demonstration."

"'Fraid?"

"Ya-as," drawled Byram.

The game-warden laboriously produced a six-shooter from his side pocket. A red bandanna handkerchief protected the shiny barrel; he unwrapped this, regarded the weapon doubtfully, and rubbed his fat thumb over the butt.

"Huh!" ejaculated Byram, contemptuously, "he's got a repeatin'-rifle; he can cut a pa'tridge's head off from here to that butternut 'cross the creek!"

"I'm goin' to git into his ice-house all the same," said the warden, without much enthusiasm.

"An' I'm bound to git my road-tax," said Byram, "but jest how I'm to operate I dunno."

"Me neither," added the warden musingly. "God knows I hate to shoot people."

What he really meant was that he hated to be shot at.

A young girl in a faded pink sunbonnet passed along the road, followed by a dog. She returned the road-master's awkward salutation with shy composure. A few moments later the game-warden saw her crossing the creek on the stepping-stones; her golden-haired collie dog splashed after her.

"That's a slick girl," he said, twisting his heavy black mustache into two greasy points.

Byram glanced at him with a scowl.

"That's the kid," he said.

"Eh? Elton's?"

"Yes."

"Your path-master?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Nuthin'—she's gook-lookin'—for a path-master," said the warden, with a vicious leer intended for a compliment.

"What of it?" demanded Byram, harshly.

"Be you fixin' to splice with that there girl some day?" asked the game-warden, jocosely.

"What of it?" repeated Byram, with an ugly stare.

"Oh," said the warden, hastily, "I didn't know nothin' was goin' on; I wasn't meanin' to rile nobody."

"Oh, you wasn't, wasn't you?" said Byram, in a rage. "Now you can jest git your pa'tridges by yourself an' leave me to git my road-tax. I'm done with you."

"How you do rile up!" protested the warden. "How was I to know that you was sweet on your path-master when folks over to Spencers say she's sweet on Dan McCloud—"

"It's a lie!" roared young Byram.

"Is it?" asked the warden, with interest. "He's a good-lookin' chap, an' folks say—"

"It's a damn *lie!*" yelled Byram, "an' you can tell them folks that I say so. She don't know Dan McCloud to speak to him, an' he's that besotted with rum half the time that if he spoke to her she'd die o' fright, for all his good looks."

"Well, well," said the game-warden, soothingly; "I guess he ain't no account nohow, an' it's jest as well that we ketch him with them birds an' run him off to jail or acrost them mountains yonder."

"I don't care where he is as long as I git my tax," muttered Byram.

But he *did* care. At the irresponsible suggestion of the gossiping game-warden a demon of jealousy had arisen within him. Was it true that Dan McCloud had cast his sodden eyes on Ellie Elton? If it were true, was the girl aware of it? Perhaps she had even exchanged words with the young man, for McCloud was a gentleman's son and could make himself agreeable when he chose, and he could appear strangely at ease in his ragged clothes—nay, even attractive.

All Foxville hated him; he was not one of them; if he had been, perhaps they could have found something to forgive in his excesses and drunken recklessness.

But, though with them, he was not of them; he came from the city—Albany; he had been educated at Princeton College; he neither thought, spoke, nor carried himself as they did. Even in his darkest hours he never condescended to their society, nor, drunk as he was, would he permit any familiarities from the inhabitants.

Byram, who had been to an agricultural college, and who, on his return to Foxville had promptly relapsed into the hideous dialect which he had imbibed with his mother's milk, never forgave the contempt with which McCloud had received his advances, nor that young man's amused repudiation of the relationship which Byram had ventured to recall.

So it came about that Byram at length agreed to aid the game-warden in his lawful quest for the ice-box, and he believed sincerely that it was love of law and duty which prompted him.

But their quest was fruitless; McCloud met them at the gate with a repeating-rifle, knocked the game-warden down, took away his revolver, and laughed at Byram, who stood awkwardly apart, dazed by the business-like rapidity of the operation.

"Road-tax?" repeated McCould, with a sneer. "I guess not. If the roads are good enough for cattle like you, pay for them yourselves. I use the woods and I pay no road-tax."

"If you didn't have that there rifle—" began Byram, sullenly.

"It's quite empty; look for yourself!" said McCloud, jerking back the lever.

The mortified game-warden picked himself out of the nettle-choked ditch where he had been painfully squatting and started towards Foxville.

"I'll ketch you at it yet!" he called back; "I'll fix you an' your ice-box!"

McCloud laughed.

"Gimme that two dollars," demanded Byram, sullenly, "or do your day's stint on them there public roads."

McCloud dropped his hands into the pockets of his ragged shooting-jacket.

"You'd better leave or I'll settle you as I settled Billy Delany."

"You hit him with a axe; that's hommycide assault; he'll fix you, see if he don't!" said Byram.

"No," said McCloud, slowly; "I did not him him with an axe. I had a ring on my finger when I hit him. I'm sorry it cut him."

"Oh, you'll be sorrier yet," cried Byram, turning away towards the road, where the game-warden was anxiously waiting for him.

"We'll run you outer town!" called back the warden, waddling down the road.

"Try it," replied McCloud, yawning.

II.

McCloud spent the afternoon lolling on the grass under the lilacs, listlessly watching the woodpeckers on the dead pines. Chewing a sprig of mint, he lay there sprawling, hands clasping the back of his well-shaped head, soothed by the cadence of the chirring locusts. When at length he had drifted pleasantly close to the verge of slumber a voice from the road below aroused him.

He listened lazily; again came the timid call; he arose, brushing his shabby coat mechanically.

Down the bramble-choked path he slouched, shouldering his wood-axe as a precaution. Passing around the rear of his house, he peered over the messed tangle of sweetbrier which supported the remains of a rotting fence, and he saw, down in the road below, a young girl and a collie dog, both regarding him intently.

"Were you calling me?" he asked.

"It's only about your road-tax," began the girl, looking up at him with pleasant gray eyes.

"What about my road-tax?"

"It's due, isn't it!" replied the girl, with a faint smile.

"Is it?" he retorted, staring at her insolently. "Well, don't let it worry you, young woman."

The smile died out in her eyes.

"It does worry me," she said; "you owe the path-master two dollars, or a day's work on the roads."

"Let the path-master come and get it," he replied.

"I'm the path-master," she said.

He looked down at her curiously. She had outgrown her faded pink skirts; her sleeves were too short, and so tight that the plump, white arm threatened to split them to the shoulder. Her shoes were quite as ragged as his; he noticed, however, that her hands were slender and soft under their creamy coat of tan, and that her fingers were as carefully kept as his own.

"You must be Ellice Elton," he said, remembering the miserable end of old man Elton, who also had been a gentleman until a duel with drink left him dangling by the neck under the new moon some three years since.

"Yes," she said, with a slight drawl, "and I think you must be Dan McCloud."

"Why do you think so?" he asked.

"From your rudeness."

He gave her an ugly look; his face slowly reddened.

"So you're the path-master?" he said.

"Yes."

"And you expect to get money out of me?"

She flushed painfully.

"You can't get it," he said, harshly; "I'm dog poor; I haven't enough to buy two loads for my rifle. So I'll buy one," he added, with a sneer.

She was silent. He chewed the mint-leaf between his teeth and stared at her dog.

"If you are so poor—" she began.

"Poor!" he cut in, with a mirthless laugh; "it's only a word to you, I suppose."

He had forgotten her ragged and outgrown clothing, her shabby shoes, in the fresh beauty of her face. In every pulse-beat that stirred her white throat, in every calm breath that faintly swelled the faded pink calico over her breast, he felt that he had proved his own vulgarity in the presence of his betters. A sullen resentment arose in his soul against her.

"I don't know what you mean," she said; "I also am terribly poor. If you mean that I am not sorry for you, you are mistaken. Only the poor can understand each other."

"I can't understand *you*," he sneered. "Why do you come and ask me to pay money to your road-master when I have no money?"

"Because I am path-master. I must do my duty. I won't ask you for any money, but I must ask you to work out your tax. I can't help it, can I?"

He looked at her in moody, suspicious silence.

Idle, vicious, without talent, without ambition he had drifted part way through college, a weak parody on those wealthy young men who idle through the great universities, leaving unsavory records. His father had managed to pay his debts, then very selfishly died, and there was nobody to support the son and heir, just emerging from a drunken junior year.

Creditors made a clean sweep in Albany; the rough shooting-lodge in the Fox Hills was left. Young McCloud took it.

The pine timber he sold as it stood; this kept him in drink and a little food. Then, when starvation looked in at his dirty window, he took his rifle and shot partridges.

Now, for years he had been known as a dealer in game out of season; the great hotels at Saratoga paid him well for his dirty work; the game-wardens watched to catch him. But his ice-house was a cave somewhere out in the woods, and as yet no warden had been quick enough to snare McCloud red-handed.

Musing over these things, the young fellow leaned on the rotting fence, staring vacantly at the collie dog, who, in turn stared gravely at him.

The path-master, running her tanned fingers through her curls, laid one hand on her dog's silky head and looked up at him.

"I do wish you would work out your tax," she said.

Before McCloud could find voice to answer, the alder thicket across the road parted and an old man shambled forth on a pair of unsteady bowed legs.

"The kid's right," he said, with a hoarse laugh; "git yewr pick an' hoe, young man, an' save them two dollars twe pay yewr pa's bad debts!"

It was old Tansey, McCloud's nearest neighbor, loaded down with a bundle of alder staves, wood-axe in one hand, rope in the other, supporting the heavy weight of wood on his bent back.

"Get out of that alder-patch!" said McCloud, sharply.

"Ain't I a-gittin'?" replied Tansey, winking at the little path-master.

"And keep out after this," added McCloud. "Those alders belong to me!"

"To yew and the *blue*-jays," assented Tansey, stopping to wipe the sweat from his heavy face.

"He's only cutting alders for bean-poles," observed the path-master, resting her slender fingers on her hips.

"Well, he can cut his bean-poles on his own land hereafter," said McCloud.

"Gosh!" observed Tansey, in pretended admiration. "Ain't he neighborly? Cut 'em on my own land, hey? Don't git passionate," he added, moving off through the dust; "passionate folks is liable to pyralyze their in'ards, young man!"

"Don't answer!" said the path-master, watching the sullen rage in McCloud's eyes.

"Pay yewr debts!" called out Tansey at the turn of the road. "Pay yewr debts, an' the Lord will pay yewr taxes!"

"The Lord can pay mine, then," said McCloud to the path-master, "for I'll never pay a cent of taxes in Foxville. Now what do you say to that?"

The path-master had nothing to say. She went away through the golden dust, one slim hand on the head of her collie dog, who trotted beside her waving his plumy tail.

That evening at the store where McCloud had gone to buy cartridges, Tanset taunted him; and he replied contemptuously. Then young Byram flung a half-veiled threat at him, and McCloud replied with a threat that angered the loungers around the stove.

"What you want is a rawhide," said McCloud, eying young Byram.

"I guess I do," said Byram, "an' I'm a-goin' to buy one, too—unless you pay that there road-tax."

"I'll be at home when you call," replied McCloud quietly, picking up his rifle and pocketing his cartridges.

Somebody near the stove said, "Go fur him!" to Byram, and the young road-master glared at McCloud.

"He was a-sparkin' Ellie Elton," added Tansey, grinning; "yew owe him a few for that too, Byram."

Byram turned white, but made no movement. McCloud laughed.

"Wait," said the game-warden, sitting behind the stove; "jest wait awhile, that's all. No man can fire me into a ditch full o' stinging nettles an' live to larf no pizened larf at me!"

"Dingman," said McCloud, contemptuously, "you're like the rest of them here in Foxville—all foxes who run to earth when they smell a Winchester."

He flung his rifle carelessly into the hollow of his left arm; the muzzle was in line with the game-warden, and that official promptly moved out of range, upsetting his chair in his haste.

"Quit that!" bawled the storekeeper, from behind his counter.

"Quit what—eh?" demanded McCloud. "Here, you old rat, give me

(Continued on page 6)